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Article

Transnational languages: beyond nation and empire? An introduction

José del Valle

Abstract

This article introduces the issue and presents the questions addressed by the contributors. Are the language policies and metalinguistic discourses that came to be associated with nationalism and imperialism still operative in the new context provided by the various phenomena associated with globalization? How and to what extent have language policies and metalinguistic discourses adjusted to the contemporary construction of the Commonwealth of Nations*,* la Comunidad Panhispánica*,* la Francophonie*, and* a Lusofonia*?*

KEYWORDS: LANGUAGE POLICY AND PLANNING, LINGUISTIC IDEOLOGIES, LINGUISTIC NATIONALISM, LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM, LANGUAGE AND GLOBALIZATION

Affiliation

City University of New York, CUNY, USA
email: josedelvalle@gmail.com

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1 Introduction

In this special issue, we focus on four originally European languages – English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish – and their involvement in nation-building, imperial expansion, and, more recently, the fast development of global power structures and a global economy. We review how these languages became artifacts in the service of emerging nation-States and how their spread beyond the territory in which they crystallized as socially recognized *languages* (as organic entities, as it were) was the direct result not only of nation-building but also of conditions created by the imperial expansion of European powers and related processes of colonization. But mostly we deal with the contemporary deployment of policies and discourses that aim, first, at controlling (or contesting) their symbolic status in both national and international linguistic markets and, second, at legitimizing (or otherwise destabilizing) their role as the foundation on which to build transnational communities such as the *Commonwealth of Nations* – or an Anglo-American community (Phillipson 2008) – *la Francophonie*, *a Lusofonia*, and *la Comunidad Panhispánica*. We examine struggles over new representations of language (as a source of transnational identity or as a valued commodity, for example) and the persistence of linguistic ideologies linked to nationalism and imperialism. Following Blommaert's (1999) notion of language-ideological debates, we tackle them as discursive sites where different economic, political, and social arrangements are worked out. In order to join the scholars who have pursued related questions (e.g. Duchêne and Heller 2007, Heller 1999, Mar-Molinero and Stewart 2006, Maurais and Morris 2003, Wright 2004), we briefly survey the political history of these languages (their history as objects of politically embedded discourse and as objects of political action) and examine where they are now. Can the present conditions under which they are managed and imagined still be construed as forms of nationalism and imperialism? How and to what extent do the new forms of capitalist expansion reproduce or destabilize the conceptual structures of linguistic nationalism and imperialism? Have the last decades of the twentieth century produced a new paradigm in which English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish are being reframed in the context of new forms of economic, political, and social organization?

As this issue shows, the recent discourses and policies designed on behalf of French, Portuguese, and Spanish often claim that they are in need of protection from various threats (Duchêne and Heller 2007) and that their value is grounded in their ability to offer alternatives to the homogenizing thrust of English. They are presented and promoted, as we will see in the following articles, as the grounds on which to build, first, strong cultural systems that will resist not only the force of English but also of Anglo-American cultural products and forms of

cultural expression and, second, strong markets in which certain *local* brands will enjoy special benefits vis-à-vis their Anglo-American competitors. Therefore, the time seems right for this particular approach to the topic: the comparative angle that we take will allow us to examine, on one hand, whether the patterns that have determined the spread of these originally European languages are equivalent and, on the other, whether the present discourses that promote French, Portuguese, and Spanish as valuable national and international languages as well as linguistic commodities are linked to interests and ideologies that in any way differ from those that inspire the defense and promotion of English.

2 Symbolic status: not just a matter of policy and planning

While the topic selected and the approach espoused in this special issue fall within the scope of language policy and planning (LPP), the disciplinary space from which the controlling questions are formulated is intentionally broader. Although admittedly LPP exhibits considerable epistemological diversity (see as evidence Ricento 2006), the core of the field remains firmly grounded in structuralism and positivism and takes a decidedly pragmatic orientation. The spirit of what Ricento has called LPP's initial phase neatly materializes in Joshua Fishman's well-known definition – "The organized pursuit of solutions to language problems, typically at the national level" (1974:79) – or in Einar Haugen's classic description:

> By language planning I understand the activity of preparing a normative orthography, grammar, and dictionary for the guidance of writers and speakers in a non-homogeneous speech community. In this practical application of linguistic knowledge we are proceeding beyond descriptive linguistics into an area where judgment must be exercised in the form of choices among available linguistic forms. (qtd in Hornberger 2006:26)

These founders of the field, being the astute observers of language that they are/were, acknowledged both the technical and subjective nature of standardization and, in affirming this double condition, anticipated later critical takes on the field (Ricento 2000): once the political nature of those choices (of those solutions to linguistic problems) was foregrounded, the LPP practice came to be recognized as deeply rooted in the interests and ideologies of its practitioners (e.g., Bex and Watts 1999, Cameron 1995, Joseph 1987, Milroy and Milroy 1999).

While the whole process of language standardization (codification, selection, elaboration, and implementation) is permeated by politics, we will concentrate, for the present purposes, on the latter:

> The implementation of a language plan focuses on the adoption and spread of the language form that has been selected and codified. This is often done through the educational system and through other laws and regulations which

> encourage and/or require the use of the standard and perhaps discourage the use of other languages or dialects. (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997:36)

Once a language has been selected and codified, and once elaboration protocols have been put in place, it is imperative to get speakers to accept that particular version of it and to use it in a series of target domains:

> The linguist with his grammar and his lexicon may propose what he will, if the methods that could assure acceptance are missing. Research on this problem is essentially one of mass media and would perhaps be more appropriate for a student of advertising than of linguistics. In the end the decisions are made by the users of the language, the ultimate decision-makers. (Haugen 1972:178)

From an LPP perspective (Haugen's restricted view of linguistics aside), it is imperative to control the symbolic status of the language (which may be promoted as, for example, the instrument that articulates the community, the bond that unites all citizens of a nation, the container of a culture and, therefore, of a unique worldview, or a democratic lingua franca and a valuable asset whose possession is required to ride along the highways of modernity). When systematic images of the language in question are projected from highly institutionalized contexts (maybe from language policy agencies themselves), we may even postulate the existence of yet another component of the planning process: *symbolic-status planning*.

However, the symbolic status of a language is always discursively negotiated in a multiplex field that includes numerous centers and margins and a plethora of agents not officially (maybe not even explicitly) involved in matters of LPP. It is true that, as Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) indicate, government agencies and educational systems often play a central role in attempting to implement a particular language policy (often unsuccessfully); but, as the articles in this issue show, we must not ignore the relevance and complexity of other institutional spaces and discursive fields – literature, advertising, graffiti, and the media, among others (Johnson and Ensslin 2007, Johnson and Milani 2010) – in naturalizing (or denaturalizing) linguistic ideas and practices that, once shaped into common sense, legitimize political projects and socio-economic arrangements (see del Valle, Heller, and Faraco's analyses of the many agents involved in disputes over control of *la Comunidad Panhispánica*, *la Francophonie*, and *a Lusofonia*). Similarly, we must not fail to recognize and investigate the ability of individuals to resist the hegemonic thrust of government agencies and powerful interest groups. All macro approaches to the constitution of a language's symbolic status (such as the ones included in this issue) must contemplate the possibility of contestation and recognize that alternative and counter-hegemonic trends are also and always in the workings.

3 Also a matter of ideology

> Few terms are as badly served by scholarship as the term ideology, and as soon as anyone enters the field of ideology studies, he or she finds him/herself in a morass of contradictory definitions, widely varying approaches to ideology, and huge controversies over terms, phenomena, or modes of analysis. (Blommaert 2005:158)

Ideology is indeed a slippery category. And so is, therefore, *linguistic ideology*. However, from a glottopolitical perspective, I embrace its adoption to highlight the well-known fact that speech itself and representations of language – implicit or explicit – are embedded in cultural, political, and social contexts. In fact, the literature that over the past two decades or so has been dealing with the topic has already produced (maybe in spite of itself) a certain level of conceptual unity (e.g. Blommaert 1999, Joseph and Taylor 1990, Kroskrity 2000, Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998). From this relative consensus, and in order to point this category in the direction of our present concern, I will define linguistic ideologies as systems of ideas that integrate notions of language, speech, and communication with specific cultural, political, and social formations. Although they are systems of *ideas*, which may be conceived as cognitive frameworks that link language and an extralinguistic order – naturalizing it and normalizing it (van Dijk 1995) – we must look into how they are produced and constantly re-produced in the realm of linguistic and metalinguistic practices. Among these, we are particularly interested (again, for our present purposes) in those that display a higher degree of institutionalization. In sum, three factors justify conceptualizing a system of ideas about language as a linguistic ideology: first, their *contextuality*, that is, their embedding in a cultural, political, and/or social order; second, their *naturalizing function*, that is, their normalizing effect on a particular extralinguistic order; and third, their *institutionality*, that is, their production and reproduction in institutionally organized practices that support specific forms of power and authority (see chapter 1 in del Valle 2007).

4 Linguistic nationalism

Within the humanities and the social sciences, there is acute awareness that languages are unquestionably tied to nation-building. A robust body of literature on the subject has already developed (e.g. Barbour and Carmichael 2000, Blommaert and Verschueren 1998, Coulmas 1988, Edwards 1985:23–46, Fishman 1972, Haugen 1972:237–54, Judt and Lacorne 2004, McCall Millar 2005, Oakes 2001) and provided us with a fairly broad and detailed view of the historical emergence of State-nations and nation-States (Wright 2004:26–35). These studies

show how the articulation of nationalist movements has run parallel to very precise policies and discourses that construct languages as well-defined and ideologically neutral discrete objects equally accessible to all (see Heller in this issue), as necessary tools for the successful articulation of the polity, and as powerful symbols of the community.

Nationalist political movements stand on the alleged existence – as a reality or as potential – of an internally homogeneous national entity and on the defense of this entity's inherent right to exercise whatever level of self-government it desires. The specific terms in which the homogeneity of the nation is defined (which may be, for example, predominantly political or ethnic) and the political project that its defense is said to serve (expansionism, separatism, economic or political reform) are two parameters that allow us to understand the multiple shapes that nationalism can take. We find, for example, nationalist discourses that highlight the nation's subjective character and ground it in a social contract daily renewed in a metaphorical plebiscite that confirms the citizens' loyalty to the shared political project (Renan 1882/1987). Others, instead, prefer to affirm the cultural substance of the nation, a human group that a series of historical circumstances have endowed with a unique and uniform set of practices and perceptual schemata that structure their existence. More often than not nationalist discourses combine subjective and objective elements in varying degrees:

> Each nationalism and every concept of the nation is composed of different elements and dimensions, which we choose to label voluntarist and organic, civic and ethnic, primordial and instrumental. No nation, no nationalism, can be seen as purely the one or the other, even if at certain moments one or other of these elements predominates in the ensemble of components of national identity. (Smith 2000:25)

Definitions of nation result therefore from a menu of elements (language, religion, folkloric traditions, forms of social organization, historical narratives, political institutions, systems of law, etc.) passed on through various discursive traditions from which a particular nationalist movement selects those felt to better serve the political objectives they pursue. In all cases, however, ethno-national affiliation is grounded in internal uniformity.

While linguistic nationalism will always place language as the main source of internal homogeneity and central pillar of collective identity, the way different movements represent language does vary. Predominantly ethnic versions of the nation tend to embrace various forms of linguistic determinism, identifying language and culture and assuming some sort of isomorphic relation between grammar and thought. In contrast, predominantly civic versions tend to see language as a highly codified system of communication equally accessible to all

that enables the economic and social life of the community (see, for example, Bourdieu 1991, for a critique of this particular ideology). Specific nationalist movements will produce localized regimes of language (Kroskrity 2000) that result from both the concrete historical circumstances of their deployment and various discursive traditions embedded in processes that unfold in the longer *durée*. But in all forms of linguistic nationalism uniformity will be a controlling ideological principle and the language – ideally a highly focalized language – will be attached to ethno-national identity.

5 Linguistic imperialism

It is clear that imperialism – military conquest of new territories, the subjugation of the native population, and the exploitation of their natural resources – provided the original thrust for the spread of English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish. It was the cultural, economic, political, and social practices associated with imperial power as well as different waves and patterns of colonization that inspired the policies and/or created the conditions under which these languages came to be dominant. However, the question remains open as to whether macro-level conditions of inequality suffice to explain all about language and empire. The breadth and complexity of the problem has triggered numerous studies on language and imperialism and produced some of the most exciting debates within the sociology of language. If we focus on perhaps the most obvious case, that of English, we immediately recognize the impact of Robert Phillipson's (1992) trail-blazing structural theory of linguistic imperialism and Alastair Pennycook's (1994, 1998) illuminating discourse-oriented analysis of the spread of English. We also come across Janina Brutt-Griffler's (2002) stimulating alternative view of how and why English has spread – and how it continues to be conceptually reframed – through the agency and will of speakers, and A. Suresh Canagarajah's (1999) fine critique of macro approaches that fail to recognize the agency of the speaking subject, especially of the speaking postcolonial subject (see Phillipson's article in this issue for his continuing debate with his critics).

6 The new paradigm for language policy and metalinguistic discourse

In writing political histories of these languages and glottopolitical histories of human communities we will undoubtedly continue to pursue an accurate understanding of the relation between language, nationalism, and imperialism. But in so doing, we must now contemplate the possibility that a new paradigm for

geopolitical organization has emerged and that such change has left its imprint on language practices, policies, and ideologies. Some of the literature focusing on the shift (e.g. Heller 1999, Mar-Molinero and Stewart 2006, Phillipson 2008, Wright 2004) has dealt with a perceived tension between, on one hand, policies and representations of language associated with the era of nationalism and imperialism and, on the other, metalinguistic discourses and communicative practices that seem to be emerging as a result of the weakening of nations as principal carriers of political agency and the development of a world economy that places precisely information and communication at the very center of its operations. This literature highlights the strength and impact of new information technologies, of new transnational sites of economic and political power, and of (highly unbalanced) global flows; and, in this context, it examines how linguistic practices, policies, and metalanguages are adjusting.

Globalization, high modernity (Heller 1999 and this issue), and new imperialism (Harvey 2005, Phillipson 2008 and this issue) have become preferred terms to designate the new conditions and, as their precise definition continues to be worked out, efforts are also made to explore their relationship to language. For example, in addition to already mentioned works, in 2003, Maurais and Morris edited a most useful volume (*Languages in a globalising world*) that covers a wide range of topics related to language changes and shifts in the context of a new international system of political relations, and, that same year, the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* (7.4) published a special issue on the sociolinguistics of globalization, offering insightful new paths towards the redefinition of our object as well as of the methods most appropriate to its analysis under the present conditions.

This special issue is conceived as a modest contribution to the study of language in the context of globalization, high modernity, and new imperialism. Contributors were asked to examine how various linguistic agents (from speakers themselves to LPP agencies) have responded to the changing status of English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish under the conditions created by the new global economy and power structures and how processes of regional integration are relying on alleged language affinities whose origin is nation-building and imperial expansion. They were asked to trace briefly the history of each language's spread and to analyze contemporary policies and discourses on language that aim at consolidating the symbolic status of the language in national and international linguistic markets and at facilitating the imagining of new transnational communities.

7 Imagined transnational communities

The referent is, of course, Benedict Anderson's much mentioned (perhaps even overused) concept:

> In an anthropological spirit, then, I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. (Anderson 1983:6)

Since imagining a community entails not fabricating it but believing in the existence of commonalities beyond the evidence offered by immediate sensory experience, the scholar's task is not (should not be) to distinguish communities "by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (p. 6). In keeping with this program, as language historians, as linguistic anthropologists, as sociologists of language, our task is not (or certainly not only) to affirm or deny the *real* grounds on which any given language-based community is imagined, but to understand the conditions that facilitate or even encourage some imaginings and not others. Of course, nations are not the only type of community that is (that has to be) imagined: "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined" (p. 6). And among the many developments that globalization has produced, we find efforts to build images of the *Commonwealth of Nations*, *la Fracophonie*, *a Lusofonia*, and *la Comunidad Panhispánica*. To what extent are the processes through which these communities are being imagined politically and discursively indebted to nationalism and imperialism? To what extent are the discourses and policies that promote French, Portuguese, and Spanish true alternatives to the promotion of English and the socio-economic arrangements it represents? To what extent are they mere competitors (or even accomplices) that ultimately legitimize the very same geopolitical order?

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